Authority and Authenticity in Xenophon’s Historical Narrative: the Battle of Mantinea

This paper examines the strategies Xenophon employs in claiming historiographical authority and persuading readers of the authenticity of his account in depicting the final showdown of *Hellenica*: the Battle of Mantinea of 362 B.C. (*Hellenica* 7.5). It then briefly compares his strategies for inducing audience persuasion in depicting the battle of Sardis, this time in the fictional *Cyropaedia*  (book 7).

It should be cause for no surprise that Xenophon invokes the twin giants of the historiographical tradition—Herodotus and Thucydides—to augment his own authority in telling a tale of war to an audience steeped in the history of war (cf., for the *Hellenica* more generally, Breitenbach 1950, Rahn 1971, Gray 1989, Rood 2007, Baragwanath forthc.). The narrative of the battle of Mantinea is indeed marked by pervasive intertextual references to both predecessors that increase the plausibility and intelligibility of the account for readers, and enable Xenophon deftly to position himself in relation to his predecessors, establishing his authority as historian and the worth of his subject. Thus the detailed description of Epaminondas’ motivations and striving for *kleos* (7.5.18) recalls the emphasis of Herodotus (cp. Hdt. 7.220 on Leonidas’ motives), and before him, Homer. And yet at this point Xenophon in authorial voice stakes a claim that this is *not* the most notable aspect: for a commander to think such thoughts is not so very wondrous, since that is how ambitious men *do* think; ‘the fact however that he had prepared (τὸ… παρεσκευακέναι) his army so that it flinched from no toil, whether by night or day, and shrank from no danger, but though it had few provisions, nonetheless it was willing to obey (σπάνιά τε τἀπιτήδεια ἔχοντας ὅμως πείθεσθαι ἐθέλειν): this seems to me to be more wondrous (ταῦτά μοι δοκεῖ θαυμαστότερα εἶναι)’ (7.5.19). What is truly remarkable and deserving of inclusion in a history is thus what a commander inspires *in his men*: the soldiers’ disposition towards Epaminondas renders immaterial even the condition of *ta epitedeia*, for despite the dearth of provisions they are willing to obey. Equally, παρεσκευακέναιimplies—in resistance to Thucydides’ emphasis on tangible *paraskeue*—that the *only* ‘preparation’ that really counts is that of the army itself. A similar point comes out elsewhere, as in Xenophon’s displacement of the focus of the narrative of Mantinea on to pre-battle preparations (described at length: 7.5.20-24) rather than the battle itself (treated in a brief sentence: 7.5.24): advance preparation is as relevant to historical outcomes as the battle itself, and indeed is more effective in revealing a man’s leadership capacity.

Thus Xenophon stands squarely on the shoulders of *both* historiographical predecessors—not just one or the other—even as he asserts the greater usefulness and suitability of his own more philosophical historical work for his readers who are living in the world of the fourth century. We witness a subtle power play taking place between the historian and his forerunners, over the course of an on-going dialogue with one other and with their respective audiences, about tradition and innovation in historiography (cp. Marincola 1997), but also about the utility of history.

The acceptance by readers of the truthfulness of the account is of course essential in the case of Xenophon’s historiographical *Hellenica*. But comparison with Xenophon’s portrayal of the Great Battle in his historical novel allows us to examine whether establishing of authority and authenticity works differently in the case of this fictional work of a different genre.

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